

Parents have hundreds of interactions with their children on an average day. What really counts is making the most of this time — showing positive attention and enjoying those daily moments with your child.

- Newborns are very interested in looking at faces or pictures of faces, and seem to prefer human faces over others.
- Babies learn by imitating. By watching how you react to people and objects, your child will learn about how to react in similar situations.

What is positive attention?

Positive attention is the way you show delight in your child and warmth in your relationship through:

- smiling at your child
- making eye contact and using caring facial expressions
- being physically gentle and caring with your child
- using words to celebrate and encourage your child
- showing interest in your child's interests, activities and achievements.

You have opportunities to give your child positive attention in your everyday interactions together.

What children learn from positive attention

Right from the beginning, it's critical that children have experiences and relationships that show them they are valued, capable human beings who bring pleasure to others. Positive attention, reactions and responses from key grown-ups help children build a picture of how valued they are.

A **child's self-image** (or self-concept) is built over time with positive, loving messages from their mum, dad and other important people. A healthy self-image is very important, not only for a child's relationship with others, but also for confidence as they learn about the world.

Children's feelings of security and safety come from their interactions with parents and other grown-ups who care for them. When children are frightened, uncertain or faced with a new or unfamiliar situation, they'll look to you for reassurance and support to feel safe and secure.

In some extreme cases, where parents are regularly distracted or unavailable to focus on their babies' needs, babies can become distressed. Research has shown that if this happens over a period of time, beginning at infancy, babies as young as six months can show signs of stress.

Research has shown that parents who smile at their babies more, who are warm and pay lots of attention, have children who tend to show more of those kinds of behaviours themselves.

How you can show positive attention

From the moment they're born, children are paying attention to what you say and do – and, perhaps even more so, **how you say and do it**.

Newborns

Even newborns are ready to relate, communicate and learn from everything and everybody around them. The more you respond and initiate communication with babies, the more they benefit.

You can respond to newborn efforts to communicate by:

- comforting them when they cry
- smiling back when they smile
- responding to the sounds they make by saying something sensible (even when you're not sure of what they're trying to communicate!).

Babies, toddlers and older children

As your child gets older, your words and actions combine to give your child important messages.

- Be aware of how your child might interpret the look on your face or tone in your voice. Even before babies can understand and use words, they are sensitive to your tone of voice, gesture, facial expression and body language.
- **Make the most of everyday activities.** Bathing, nappy changing, feeding and dressing might seem like things to be endured, but these daily activities provide important opportunities for you to connect with your child in a meaningful way. For example, you might want to give your child cuddles and tickles while you're drying her after her bath.
- Whenever you can, put aside preoccupations and planning, and **get into the moment with your child**. This could be as simple as squatting down to look at a caterpillar together, even if you're in a hurry to get somewhere. These kinds of interactions don't have to take up a lot of time to make a real difference.
- Look at your child, smile at him, show interest, pay attention and engage with him in positive ways. This all sends the message that your child is special and important.
- Focus on the positives. If you're always correcting your child, or you seem unhappy, angry or distracted when you're together, this sends the message that your child isn't capable, valued or worth your attention. So before you correct your child, **ask yourself: does it really matter?** Is it really important or could I just let it go?

‘When a child walks in the room, your child or anybody else's child, **do your eyes light up?** ... that's what they're looking for. When my children used to walk in the room when they were little, I looked at them to see if they had buckled their trousers or if their hair was combed or if their socks were up. And so you think your affection and deep love is on display because you're caring for them. It's not. When they see you, they see the critical face ... Let your face speak what's in your heart. It's just as small as that, you see.’

Toni Morrison, novelist, awarded Nobel Prize for literature and Pulitzer Prize for American Literature

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